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ABSTRACT

Whether teaching incoming students or training faculty in other disciplines, writing instructors often form unrealistic expectations about goals and skills of students and colleagues, which (like chemical addictions) predictably recur each semester as though they had never occurred before. For effective instruction, it is important that expectations--of oneself, students, teachers, curricula, seminars, and the whole educational endeavor--be recognized, scaled down, or realistically expanded. One-to-one conferences offer the opportunity to address such expectations and break teacher-student codependency by dispelling judgments or projections and consolidating what the participants require of each other. In developing an upper-level course, conferencing helps all concerned--faculty, teaching assistant, and writing consultant--to discover, examine, and in some cases reformulate assumptions. (SR)

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7. Description of Individual Presentation

Addicted to Expectations? Conference!

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Whether teaching incoming students or training faculty in other disciplines, writing instructors often form unrealistic expectations about goals and skills of students and colleagues. For effective instruction, it's important that expectations be recognized, scaled down or realistically expanded.

This presentation summarizes expectations that students and teachers commonly formulate about each other, then examines several opportunities afforded by one-to-one tutorials for breaking teacher-student codependency. In an ideal conference, participants dispel judgments or projections and consolidate what they require of each other.

Parallels can be drawn between teaching the introductory writing course and expanding writing in the nonwriting curriculum. In developing and teaching an upper-level course, conferencing helps all concerned--faculty, teaching assistant, and writing consultant--to discover, examine and in some cases reformulate assumptions.

After just a few classes with students or meetings with colleagues, expectations can quickly build. And, predictably, they also recur each semester as though they had never occurred before. Hence this presentation concludes with an analysis of instructional and collegial relations at the university level, informed by models of healthy dependence developed by researchers who have studied recovery from chemical addiction. Requirements for success include agreed-upon roles, clearly defined boundaries, and balanced combination of the writing process' creative freedom with the sober limits encouraged by conference discussion.

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Addicted to Expectations? Confer!

In this panel we're supposed to talk about helping our students by conferring with them. The focus of my talk is on helping ourselves. It's essential that we ourselves write and confer; I've gathered this paper by talking with colleagues. Talking about how we've recognized and either compressed or expanded our expectations while teaching brings our faces alive with laughs of remembrance and furrows of regret. Let me emphasize, though, that these remarks focus not on the instructor's role in relation to students--as word processor abuse counselor, or writing from experience therapist, or thematic or revising coach.[1] I am not looking for an ideal or analogue for the teaching role--at least not this afternoon. I'm thinking instead of flexibility of roles. The focus comes back to the writer's relation to self--be the writer myself or my student or my colleague--and to a sound relation of that self to the general context of education. Conferring can encourage sound relation to self and to context. Through contact and conversation with others we find the words to describe and to better our awareness of who we are. Responding in writing, we most often rely on the handy mind as our primary tool. In the conference, in each others' physical presence, we're able to use more of our inner resources: not just the knowledge of information and logic and methods but the wisdom of humor, of fear, of self-confidence, of risk, of the whole spirit--spirit even in a worldly sense, that inspiration which animates and even motivates our endeavors.

To have an honest relation with oneself, it helps to examine those recurrent expectations--of our selves, students, teachers, curricula, seminars, and the whole educational endeavor--those recurrent expectations which resemble addictions. I define addictions as those recurrent and illogical forms of physical self-abuse which start with an originally innocent and well-intentioned desire. Recovery from physical addictions is a hot topic and a burgeoning field. Not all the emerging theories about physical addictions leap the gap from individual to interactive applications.[2] But with our multiple roles and responsibilities, college writing instructors might consider the usefulness of two particular theories: that the essential feature of the addictive response is rigidity (Woodman 52) and that the addictive state is simply an exaggeration of the

semi-hypnosis with which our minds usually conduct their daily business (Sandor 23). In order to live with our expectations, we might also make use of a few practices from the recovery model outlined in the book Alcoholics Anonymous: surrender of control, personal inventory, reflection that involves deeply listening, and support--frequently one-to-one--from others involved in the same process (59-60). Alcoholics recovering through AA say the point of these practices is not to overcome the addiction as though recovery were a matter of will power; the point is to abstain from the addiction. The addiction still exists, but it is not acted on. Such a model would help us to look at our expectations without condemning them, to surrender to the fact that expectations will always be there, will outlast us, and that the way to live with them realistically is not through theory or text but through oral communication.

That's leaping to my conclusion before you do. Let me backtrack.

I wish us to examine how the expectations that interfere with our teaching can be found, known, and either overcome or accepted. By expectations I mean those plans for doing or assumptions about being--and about others' beings--which fix us on a narrow track or in a close compartment. Rather than giving us the stability we might hope for, such expectations destabilize our power to help others, or ourselves. In Teaching One-to-One, Muriel Harris says "we may generate some ideas about what to help the student with, only to find as we progress, because of new information, that our suppositions were wrong, incomplete, or shortsighted" (80). In her discussion of diagnosis as "the necessary basis for--and precursor of--instruction," Harris uses the metaphor of lenses. This metaphor suggests we may need to see through what's in front of us. She also outlines how before considering different facets of others or their writing, we can see through, or diagnose, ourselves: our particular concerns as teachers and our idiosyncracies of learning and composing. Then we will be able to see better those "interferences" (81)--preferences and premises growing from our own approach--that interfere with communication.

Whether teaching incoming students or training faculty in other disciplines, writing instructors often form unrealistic expectations about goals and skills of students and colleagues.[3] For effective instruction, it's

important that expectations be recognized, scaled down, or realistically expanded.

I often think that others know what they're doing successfully. Such is not always the case. For class discussion I once selected "Conservation: Of Lunchbags and Lifestyles," an essay which began with a schooldays anecdote about a family's practice of reusing paper bags. By mid-essay the student writer had sketched an insightful thesis about the interdependence of household and planet, a thesis built on examples from daily life and tension with the dictionary definition of the topic at hand: "Conservation does not mean preserving trees for posterity in their natural state; it means limiting our consumption of paper products--like brown paper lunch bags--using what we do use wisely, thereby cutting down fewer trees, and lessening resource depletion" (Dodge). She ended the penultimate paragraph this way: "Conservation does not mean locking our resources away, it means using them sensibly. It involves coming to an understanding of our world, and desiring to limit our wastefulness so that future generations can enjoy a still plentiful planet." The piece did need revising and editing; however, the originality of approach was admirable and though the author's words were not always connected well, her thought was. But her first response in conference was "Oh. I thought it wasn't very good." Perhaps she meant the verbal expression, which did need improvement. But she needed one convincing somebody, in this case her teacher, to change her perspective on <u>good</u>. Circulating in the collective wisdom of the Cornell writing program, and indeed in our whole profession, is a theory that good writing indicates that the writer knows <u>why</u> the subject is important.[4]

If a conference only illumines for the writer that she knows what she knows, it's done a valuable service. I heard that "wasn't very good" remark at a faculty training seminar, from the mouth of a classics professor who had designed a creative sequence of writing assignments without recognizing that, with one small rearrangement made, it <u>was</u> a sequence. It's unwise to believe, simply because we can see a piece of work is good, that others take satisfaction in their work and believe in its quality. A mathematics instructor in the same tiny training group explained a bit about the design of readings and writings in his course, and was validated by response about the wonder and accuracy of his explanatory metaphors.

The word metaphor, though not included in the written material we were discussing, was essential to his earliest conception of the course. In all these cases the quality of the work's presentation needed to be bettered in order to match the quality of thought with which the author had created the work. Whether students or teachers, writers may need to realistically expand their notion of their own capabilities. Face-to-face contact is a way they can prepare-- and prepare to revise--their work for group response, for a larger audience.

Ask students to verbally caricature teachers, and you may hear sketches of threateners and anxious guides; listen in at staff meetings and you may hear teachers talk about students as the sheep and the occasional rebel hero who populate our writing seminars. We're addicted to our stereotypes. It's easy to be. But if students can come to know an instructor as individual rather than as mysterious role-player, then they may be able to transform past traumas with negative authority figures from wounds into scars. In an ideal conference, participants dispel judgments or projections and consolidate what they require of each other. Some students react rather than respond to readings; they summarize what a source shows or a quotation says but avoid the risk of analysis, the focus on particular details which might result in both an engagingly written introduction and a conceptual involvement in the material. I often expect that they don't want to be this way, that they want more ways of thinking available to them--intuitive or logical in addition to sensate. In many cases of such projection, I'm wrong. Conferring with such students, I'm better able to accept who they are.[5]

Unexamined assumptions conceal carelessness and of course prejudice. Assuming I prioritize correctness (which I don't), a student may perceive an error-free wordprocessed page as thoughtfully revised when little thought has gone into revision or even when there's been no revision at all. Operating on racist stereotypes, I might assume an Asian student is writing weak essays despite hardwork (newly coined as one word)--when really the student was not working hard, or even hardly working at all. Conferences are a direct and time-saving way to acknowledge and overcome gross assumptions such as those.

Conferences are also a good way to address subtle questions. I asked a

group of Writing Workshop students to write me a question that remained after they had selected a topic for investigation, studied our writing textbook's section on research, and attended an instruction session with the reference librarian. In practical terms, their questions could be answered only in conference. "How do you keep the flow going?"--the large term flow needs defining, then we can begin to speak about going. "How many footnotes are required for this paper--is it a specific amount, or is it as many as we feel necessary?"--like many student questions, this contains it own answer. "How do you avoid redundance when you are trying to emphasize a point?"--how would a teacher begin to answer this question, which apparently grows out of a specific example or plan the student has in mind? In the guessing-game approach to knowledge, with fixed roles presupposed, with the teacher as answerer rather than mentor, the student might not even feel comfortable asking such questions. All the control of information is on one side. If we stay aware that fears and critical judgment may drift up from the ways we've been conditioned to play such roles, conferences may afford opportunities to quell such tendencies toward teacher-student codependency. A leap to the oral is needed, with the lead most likely "what do you mean?" or "what do you think?"--questions which written on a page might sound dismissive, but in person emphasize, with respect, the questioner and the innate knowledge contained in the question.

Often our expectations of students grow from expectations of ourselves. Listening to colleagues share their patterns of pedagogic expectation, deflation, and reformulation, I found that those with extensive teaching experience had arrived at the truism that our finest feature is often also our besetting sin. We often expect a lot of ourselves[6] and may demand more of students than they are able or willing to give. And just as much as students, we are susceptible to expectations of the speed with which a process (as distinct from a paper or a course) will be completed; there may be a long period of time where the writer perceives nothing happening and when the perceptive teacher's job is primarily encouragement. Our perceptions distort when we become intolerant of our small role in this overall process, when we forget that breakthroughs often happen later, when we're no longer together. Likewise for course development and curricular changes.

Parallels can be drawn between teaching introductory writing and expanding writing in the nonwriting curriculum. Last year I worked with an interdisciplinary team to develop a senior seminar with a strong writing component for the Biology & Society major, itself an interdisciplinary program. The challenge of such curricular enrichment is to develop sequences of writings and writing-related tasks that are integral to the field of study's content, so that the emphasis on writing is central to the students' work in the course rather than peripheral, and to deal with the intensive labor that responding to writing requires. Conferring helped all concerned--faculty, reaching assistant--I mean teaching assistant--and writing consultant--to discover, examine and in some cases reformulate assumptions.[7]

After just a few classes with students or meetings with colleagues, expectations can quickly build. And, predictably, they also recur each semester as though they had never occurred before. Discoveries in the addictions and recovery field about the steps necessary for an alcoholic to change from automatic chemical dependency to adjustable healthy dependence on self and others might help us learn about ourselves, help us to develop a self that is strongly individuated yet flexible, one that responds rather than reacts to the flux of its context. Those of us who wish may inform instructional and collegial relations with the AA model, which emphasizes acceptance of our context and of the support provided by others. The AA suggestions for personal inventory and reflection are also useful. Such practices may help us be more fully ourselves and do our work without rigidity, without hypnotic or automatic response.

My theories have a compulsive way of pushing me about. Not those theories that I've learned from experiences but rather the ones about what is to come: loyalty to my plans--class plans, course plans, plans for what a student needs. I can be unconsciously or even consciously aware from classroom dynamics that something is or is not working yet still deny it--even a group of ten can be large enough to allow me to hope that my perceptions are off or that there are one or several individuals for whose benefit I should carry on or follow through despite what appears to be happening. But a conference is a smaller container. In its crucible, denial about what's happening is more difficult to perpetuate. Personal contact

allows me to bypass loyalty to my good intentions, my resolutions, and to replace a moral sense of ought to with a heartfelt will.

I think it important that we practice the types of diagnosis that Harris recommends, that we not take self-diagnosis for granted, and that we continuously and willingly diagnosis our "reflection-in-action" (xi), to borrow Donald Schon's term. Schon has studied professionals' use of intuitive and artistic as well as intellectual ways of knowing about their work and its context. But further than his recommendation that we think about what we are doing (61), we can also make a practice of thinking about who is doing that work, who is being--being that teacher, that writer, that adviser, that listener. [8] I suggest we become self-reflective practicioners. Requirements for success include flexibility of roles yet clearly defined boundaries, and a balance between the writing process' creative freedom and the sober limits encouraged by conference discussion. The human touch of conferring is a way to prevent freezing in action while being, a way to remember the purpose of reflection, which is to maintain or restore our relation with our work.

Ideally Harris hopes awareness will prevent our judging students (and I would add, colleagues) in terms of ourselves. But realistically she does not expect self-awareness to lead to total prevention of that fault; mistakes and even reruns may happen with different individuals, but "being cognizant of the problem may keep us from committing excesses" (81). My interest is in how we can become cognizant. How do I sense my predictability? How do I sense when a pattern in my thinking thwarts my effort rather than serving my work? While teaching, how do I stay connected with providence and serendipity instead of clinging to the moment before now? My theory is that the flat recognition of so many of our strengths and defects--our masks, hopes, fears--comes most immediately and tellingly in the combination of thoughtful purpose and conversational atmosphere afforded by conference contact.

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February 1989

Notes

[1]Indeed, the flexibility of multiple roles is even more crucial in conference than in the classroom. To facilitate rather than direct the writing process, it's important that instructor not identify as the writer, but play a separate role. Harris notes the importance of not conflating one's role with the writer in her description of "teacher-as-coach" (35). Other roles she posits we play during conference are commentator, counselor, listener, and diagnostician (35-40). Each role necessitates different technique. Donald Schon also works extensively with the analogy of educator as coach, choosing that analogue in fact because of the multiple abilities coaches must manifest and employ simultaneously: extrapolation from past experience to a particular student's particular problem, direct communication, and responsible avoidance of defensiveness. See Proceedings of the Conference on Professionalism, Vocationalism & Liberal Education (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1988), 13-15.

[2] Alongside media popularization of information about chemical dependency, cautions have been voiced. One such article is Michael J. Bader's "Looking for Addictions in All the Wrong Places" in Tikkun 3,6 (November 1988): 13-16 and 95-8. Bader admonishes therapists who work with codependents for applying what he calls "the addiction model" beyond its plausible limits, to the point that its use is simply analogue rather than applicable analysis. He criticizes Janet Woititz' Adult Children of Alcoholics and Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much for developing psychological theory but ignoring social analysis. However, much current literature about addiction examines historical and cultural influences on the addictive process--among others, Jungian analysts Woodman and Jan Bauer certainly do. Also, Bader catches in the bind of looking for a single-cause theory; he assumes there is a doorstep where blame can be placed for the negative consequences of addictions, and he implies that ACA therapists encourage clients to find that place in order to banish guilt. Rather, Woititz' purpose is to remove guilt from the codependent, not to transfer it elsewhere. Also, the Bader article overlooks

the AA hypothesis, agreed with by many analysts, that the fundamental component of even the most grossly physical addictions is not physical.

But Bader's cautions about what he calls "the addiction model" are instructive. This phenomenon sweeping the headlines like wildfire is no magic solution for all that ails us. When I suggest we apply the AA model of recovery from physical addiction to more ethereal realms, I want to qualify that suggestion in two ways: 1) that we use that model for release from cycles rather than for blame or excuse; 2) that we apply the ideal internally, in a self-reflective way, to monitoring and correcting our own patterns of automatic or unrealistic expectation. We needn't expect others to find the model useful, nor should we expect its suggestions to be appropriate for every interaction.

For further exploration of the popularization of addictions, contrast the claims made in Anne Wilson Schaef's When Society Becomes an Addict with Stanton Peele's The Diseasing of America: How the Addiction Industry Captured Our Soul.

[3] Though they're not central to this discussion, expectations that arise from the individual's most obvious or most formal role are just as recurrent, and it's just as important to recurrently see through them, as those which I do discuss. Most first-year college students I work with have been taught a great deal about correctness. Writing class is usually their only seminar; the rest of their courses are huge lectures in which their grasp of information is tested. This context can reinforce an expectation inculcated in many of them during prior education that the teacher has the answer, or has no true interest in what they often call "personal opinion," by which they mean analyzing what they read or inferring points from evidence. In fact, such fundamental components of rhetoric are often called "creative writing" by many of my students. If early in the semester they realize that investing themselves in writing projects will not be penalized, many of their essay's problems with concreteness, coherence, and even with grammar disappear.

But I, having invested a decade in teaching, am not new to college like they are. Returning first papers to a class of students I once remarked that I felt like an archaeologist sifting through their prose: under the rubble of incoherent paragraphs, tangled sentences, and generalities echoing among

the ruins, many valuable sherds of talent were visible. But what was I sifting for? The wish that this semester I wouldn't have to be an archaeologist, that somehow students would have learned to write by now--because I had learned, or because I'd taught so many previous groups of their peers. Faulty expectation! Also, I repeatedly imagine that the writing course is important to each student, since I see writing as integral to learning and communicating in any field of study. So I expect that students will naturally invest time and effort in such an important enterprise. I forget their individual lives and priorities differ. I forget that education is an institution, that academic workloads as well as other involvements place at times unmanageable demands on students, that by nature we are dealing with the invented, the synthetic, the artificial--as institutions are meant to accommodate diversity--and hence within the institution we each come up with a different interpretation of its purpose. We speak our Babels and hope our synthetic creation will accommodate them.

[4] For reminding me about this item of popular (and antivivisectionist) wisdom, and also for her reminder about the positive power of great expectations, I thank Katherine K. Gottschalk, Assistant Director of the J.S. Knight Writing Program, Cornell University. Others instrumental in helping me wander and wonder through the thoughts that developed into this paper include Larry I. Palmer, Vice President for Academic Programs at Cornell, and Jeanne E. Shaffer, Chair of the Department of Visual and Performing Arts at Huntingdon College. Thanks also to Lynne S. Abel, Mary Gaylord, Thomas W. Rishel, and the other participants in the June 1988 Cornell Writing Program Summer Institute directed by James Slevin.

[5] Conversely, there are cases of delight, cases in which an exploratory conference can engender a spark. Having to do an assignment is one of the biggest gripes we hear--and say ourselves! Conference encouragement can help the writer pretend to want to do the task. Such expectation can create a genuine desire, a feeling of really wanting to write the paper-- an odd feeling at the beginning. Walt Whitman notwithstanding, we don't always like to contradict ourselves. But then, as a colleague put it, "you find out what your real question is and that you are interested--all because you

once had to be" (Gottschalk).

Individual contact can remove the smoke created by seminar groupthink: fifteen or twenty personalities simultaneously uniting and eradicating themselves by insisting that a writing task is onerous or irrelevant. The conference airs what's beneath the personality, shifts role-playing into playing a conscious role. And the conference also allows for adapting those stages of revising and editing that theoretically are helpful for every writer and every writing, knocking the stages around or even knocking a few out to fit the individual need, so everyone's not on a uniform schedule, so that fixity won't kill fire.

In the increasingly multicultural environment of college campuses, it's important to remember that each culture has a set of expectations about learning. And it's funny to see the crosscultural resemblances that turn the expected stereotype on its head. A bicultural student may overtly request rules for writing and be puzzled that I use weak and strong as criteria in preference to right and wrong; but the next conferee--a nodding, sunny, monocultural American classmate--may just as avidly but quite furtively also be seeking simple rules to bypass the writer's responsibility for spirited organization and style. I sympathize, for writing an essay sometimes poses as many choices as gutting and rebuilding a house. Hire someone else! is the wish.

6 For the unconvinced, a few examples follow. "The expectation I have about students? It's the expectation I have about all of life: that their energy level, commitment, comfort dealing with anxiety and uncertainty will be as strong as mine" (Palmer). To attempt to instill fervor in the disinterested is often to lose the interested. A similar need to confluence with reality is voiced in this statement: "I was determined I was going to teach everybody everything. It took years to realize that there were some students were weren't going to get it, who didn't care if they were going to get it, and who didn't want it" (Shaffer). Common sense! of course we should know these things. But to act and counteract on truisms, we must truly live them--to know their truth for ourselves. Careful to present curricula in a logical order, that professor discovered that "some people aren't ready for order when they come to college." Surprise! we laugh, but we need to make the admission through our own work in order to

creatively use it as this person did: using a conference to identify the time when an individual student may need to study parts of a curriculum out of sequence, and to identify whether that student has the self-discipline to do so in independent study, without the structure of a class. It's for the sake of those self-motivated individuals that we continue to project great expectations despite many confluences with the reality of their uninterested peers. We can acknowledge and employ an expectation that produces results, so long as we don't count on it producing the same results in every body. Expecting the best, we often get it.

[7]Cornell University's Freshman Seminar Program has provided forms of writing across the curriculum for as long as anyone can remember. Nonetheless, increasing complexity of disciplines plus the university's growing role as a research institution have in recent years increased the information load and amount of specialization in most majors, and decreased the attention paid to composing and writing skills in those curricula. Cornell is now reintegrating writing into a number of upper-division courses.

To expect instructors in other disciplines to involve themselves in rhetorics, handbooks, or writing as a field of study is an enormously inflated expectation. If writing instructors who train faculty operate with such expectation, writing will stay in quotation marks, separate from the curriculum, be that human service studies, mathematics, or classics. We can give such people a crash course in rhetoric reading or wait for them to accumulate a working vocabulary for teaching writing by sheer years of experience. Or we can meet them for several well-timed conferences. The personal contact provides inspiration and allows them to air doubts; often listening to and rephrasing these instructors' ideas allows them to proceed, sometimes with additional vocabulary (like <u>coherence</u> or <u>concrete details</u> or <u>audience</u>) or redirection (like a sequence of assignments rather than separate papers)--in short, with pedagogical strategies that already, before the conference, were fundamentally sound. Often in our Biology and Society conferences I could explain--because I have the rhetorical terminology--the logic of a strategy which seemed to the person who'd thought of it like intuition or (something that's taken as mysteriously threatening by some academics) common sense. With explanation

provided, that instructor felt more comfortable proceeding from thought to development.

It's important to clarify roles and responsibilities in collaborative work. Specialized as we all are, it takes time to erase the notion held by some instructors in other disciplines that someone else is better qualified to teach writing than they. My role as consultant blurred and was reiterated early in the semester when sets of papers were submitted. In the same way that writing was to be an integral and emphasized activity for the students in the course, so its teaching and evaluation was to be done by the course instructors. Amid enthusiasm and the press of work they would forget that my role was to teach skills of teaching writing to them; they would remember that I could teach writing to students. Of course upon receiving large amounts of student work, I myself persist in looking around for a savior, until I start the process. In one conference with the teaching assistant he and I shared procrastination stories, and that actually helped him cut that evasion short. In other conferences with the teaching staff we discussed the accuracy, extent and quality of commentary for students on their papers; guidelines students might need for formulating their responses to particular assignments; application of our reserve reading on rhetoric to students' individual essays and collaborative case studies.

In the Biology and Society course we wondered--and still to some extent do wonder--whether students needed to be told the sequence and connections in our syllabus between reading, writing, and thinking--or was it enough to have designed those connections? If we provided the tools, students would probably know how to use them--correct? This expectation needed to be scaled down! We did provide multi-dimensional focus on language skills: attention to writing during class, short papers in various essay forms, written peer critique, extensive feedback on all papers and presentations, written faculty critique of each collaborative group's presentation of research for their case study, conferences, and case study group roundtable discussions with all teaching staff before each student group wrote its final draft of the project. The outcome, not surprisingly, depended on the individual student's talent, on previous instruction and practice in writing, on ability to work with others and on level of commitment to working with our teaching assistant on their papers

and oral presentations.

[8]Schon demonstrates ways that professionals circumvent the paralysis that might ensue from too much thinking while doing (276); he argues that those two modes complement rather than exclude each other.

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